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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001022

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
P FOR HERRO MUSTAFA
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA WARNS AGAINST HIZBALLAH'S
GROWING STANDING

REF: BEIRUT 1011

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) PM Siniora is pleased with the final cabinet formation and does not foresee difficulties in the preparation of the ministerial statement. However, he remains concerned about Hizballah's growing stature, particularly in light of the upcoming prisoner exchange between Lebanon and Israel. He said Hizballah will claim credit for that exchange, including with other Arab states, and will use it as further proof on the need to maintain its weapons. Siniora acknowledged the USG message that the release of Samir Kantar should not be greeted with too much fanfare and should instead be welcomed as the closing of a long-standing contentious issue. He added, however, that Lebanon had been demanding the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israel for a long time, and that it could have been achieved long ago had it not been for Israeli intransigence. Siniora reiterated that Israel withdrawal from Sheba'a Farms would be an easy way for Israel to demonstrate its intentions for peace, and to boost the legitimacy of the Lebanese government as opposed to Hizballah. He also warned that any progress in Syrian-Israeli talks should not come at the expense of Lebanon. End summary.

CONFIDENT ON CABINET

12. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with PM Siniora and his aide, Rola Nouredine, at the PM's office in the Grand Serail on July 15. When Charge offered him U.S. congratulations on forming a cabinet, the normally reserved Siniora lit up with satisfaction and said a series of last minute accomplishments had succeeded in raising the quality of representation in the cabinet. Noting that the cabinet would meet for the first time the following day, July 16, and would appoint a committee to develop the ministerial statement to parliament, he said he "did not foresee difficulties" in preparing the statement. (Note: The statement is due within 30 days of cabinet formation, or August 11, and is expected to address the sensitive issue of Hizballah's arms. This was the first time in recent memory that Mohamed Chatah did not participate in an Embassy meeting with the PM. Formerly Siniora's senior aide, Chatah had officially taken up earlier in the day his new post as Finance Minister. Chatah told Charge the evening before that he would be working full time as Finance Minister and no

longer be an aide to the PM, and that Siniora had begun the process to replace him. End note.)

CONCERNED ABOUT HIZBALLAH

13. (C) With the cabinet formed, the government now faced a series of security, social, and economic challenges, Siniora continued. Countering recent events that were undermining liberalism and democracy in Lebanon to the benefit of Hizballah was a top priority, he stressed. Unfortunately, he opined, everything Israel was doing was a plus for Syria, Iran, and Hizballah, including the expected July 16 release of Lebanese prisoners (septel). By dealing with Hizballah rather than the government, Israel had enhanced Hizballah's standing in Lebanon and the region. Hizballah's arms must be discussed within Lebanon, he said, but everything was pointing toward an even more adamant stance on Hizballah's part on the need to keep its weapons.

PRISONER EXCHANGE BOOSTS HIZBALLAH'S CREDIBILITY

14. (C) Siniora acknowledged the Charge's concern that the release of Samir Kantar, imprisoned since 1979 for the killing of three Israelis, should not be greeted with too much fanfare and should instead be welcomed as the closing of the file on a long-standing issue of contention. He added, however, that Lebanon had been demanding the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israel for a long time, and that it

BEIRUT 00001022 002 OF 002

could have been achieved long ago had it not been for Israeli intransigence. Again, he stressed, the general conclusion is that force and violence are "the only language Israel understands," giving a "major facelift" to Hizballah and enhancing the role of extremists in the region.

15. (C) Nouredine added that viewing the release of the prisoners as the end to a chapter was acceptable if viewed within the framework of UNSCR 1701. In that case, however, other aspects of 1701 needed to be addressed, including Israeli cluster bombs and overflights. Both issues are easily solvable, and doing so would narrow the list of excuses for Hizballah to maintain its weapons, she argued. Instead, Israel was trying to put Sheba'a into a broader, regional framework, she said (we assume she meant a Syria-Israel track). Siniora agreed, pleading, "Please pass this message to the Israelis!"

SHEBA'A: "LOW COST, HIGH RETURN"

16. (C) If Israel really wanted peace with Lebanon, withdrawing from Sheba'a Farms would be an easy gesture that would help boost the legitimacy of the Lebanese government, Siniora stressed. Such a move would entail a "low cost, but high return" and help make the argument that diplomacy and the principles of freedom, democracy, and non-violence can also achieve results.

SYRIAN TRACK MUST NOT BE AT LEBANON'S EXPENSE

17. (C) Commenting dryly that it was "very fashionable to talk to the Syrians" these days, Siniora labeled French President Sarkozy's recent meeting in Paris with Syrian President Asad as "big fanfare" rewarding Asad for his willingness to talk with the Israelis. The Syrian-Israel track appeared to be "gaining momentum and on the front burner" of the peace process, he noted, with an unstated apparent reference to the Israeli-Palestinian track.

18. (C) Siniora said he was not opposed to talking to the

Syrians, but stressed that any deals should not come at Lebanon's expense, citing the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as a major concern. Lebanon remained committed to the Arab peace initiative, he said, adding that implementation of 1701 could lead to implementation of the 1949 armistice agreement between Lebanon and Israel.

GRANT